

OSCAR JÁSZI IN EXILE: DANUBIAN EUROPE RECONSIDERED

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Oscar Jászi was born in 1875 at Nagykároly as the son of a provincial doctor. Oscar studied philosophy and political science at Budapest university and became an official in the Ministry of Agriculture. Unable to agree with the reactionary agrarian policies of the department, he resigned his post and became one of the founders and most active leaders of the Hungarian Sociological Society which R. W. Seton-Watson compared to the Fabian Society in England. He edited its journal, *Huszadik Század* (The Twentieth Century) which was a monthly review that soon acquired a high reputation for its thorough analysis of social and economic problems and its courageous advocacy of political reform.

Jászi and his group fought for justice for non-Magyar nationalities of Hungary and the fullest possible linguistic and cultural liberty in local administration, education, and justice. On the very eve of World War I, Jászi and his friends founded the Radical Party, whose daily organ, *Világ* (The World) acquired increasing prominence as a focus of Hungarian pacifism. It first seemed to advocate the ideas of a "Mitteleuropa", which was supported by the Germans in 1915. Jászi, however, was not interested in the imperialistic and Pan-German ideas of Friedrich Naumann. Instead, he focused on the idea of a peaceful confederation of races on the Danube.

According to Jászi, Count Károlyi denounced the Dualistic system on the eve of World War I and called for a rapprochement with the Slavs. In his own article in the liberal daily *Világ* on July 19, 1914 Jászi wrote just prior to the outbreak of hostilities, "It is not true that sympathizers will be found in the ranks of working Hungary and thinking Hungary against Serbia. Outside the feudal class and high finance, the whole public opinion of the country is for peace."¹

In the October Revolution of 1918, Jászi entered the Károlyi government as the Minister of Nationalities in an attempt to win non-Magyars to a policy of radical and linguistic equality. The policy of "Hungarian Switzerland" rested on federation, free trade, and democracy. In 1918, Jászi devised a

Danubian Federation that would be a pentarchy or federation of five kingdoms. These would include the following national groups: 1) Hungarians, 2) German/Austrians, 3) Polish, 4) Czechs, 5) South Slavs. The member states would form a customs union and would have a united defense and foreign policy. There would be a single "supreme court" for federation.

By this time, however, Hungary had advanced to a territorial rather than a federal solution and Jászi was unable to implement his Danubian plan. There was no possibility of any serious progress in the nationalities question because of the arbitrary partitioning of Hungary. He resigned his post as Minister of Nationalities saying, "I hope to be in a position to work more successfully for the furtherance of my plan for a Danube confederation."²

After World War I, some Hungarian intellectuals sought refuge from the repressive regime of Admiral Horthy in the United States; among these was Oscar Jászi. He was the undisputed leader of Hungarian émigré scholars in the interwar years. It was during this time that he came to the conclusion that the federal solution was the only one that could solve the problems of Danubian Europe. Prior to the First World War I, Jászi did not see this as the only alternative to friction and fratricide but after the inequitable treaties of Paris he did.

In *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Hungary*, Jászi states that he never gave support to Naumann's militaristic "Mitteleuropa" but rather to a democratic and pacifist union of all people living in the Danube basin. He saw this as a prelude to the stage where a United States of Europe would be formed. He also discusses how Michael Károlyi, president of Hungary at the time, drew up a plan which was essentially in agreement with Louis Kossuth's well-known federalist plan. Jászi notes that this is important because this statement was made at a time when no one had discussed something like this or even similar to it. He wrote in the introduction that only a democratic Confederation could really solve the question of national minorities in those states and achieve any real economic reconstruction (September 1923, New York).

The treaties of Paris, he felt, were inequitable for the people of Central and Southeastern Europe because national boundaries were drawn in such a way that was to exclude a lot of people from their homeland and make them minorities in foreign lands. This was especially visible in Hungary. After the treaty of Trianon, Hungarians were living as a minority population in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Rumania. Historic Hungary had lost two-thirds of its land to these countries.

According to Jászi, the solution to inequity would be the formation of a Danubian federation. He looked to others in the past such as Lajos Kossuth

to show that plans for cooperation rather than discord have existed in the past and could exist in the future if only the peoples of Danubian Europe would stand together. He felt that the danger came from without rather than from within which was the more popular view in interwar Europe. Even such democratic leaders as Czech Thomas Masaryk looked toward a national rather than international solution during this period.

Jászi felt this solution was misguided and spent a lot of his time trying to prove so. Settling down to a career in America as a history professor in quiet Oberlin College, Jászi nevertheless remained active in the political ideology of his time. Jászi's advocacy of reform and democracy made him a critic of contemporary Hungary. He especially felt that Hungary's nationality problem had to be dealt with in a more humane, constructive fashion. Repression and forcible assimilation had undesirable consequences because it increased tensions among nationalities and was self-defeating. Jászi felt most importantly that the fundamental needs of each nationality had to be guaranteed. This should include good schools, good government, and a good judicial system. Jászi believed that each nationality had a right to express its own culture. This he believed could only be achieved in a democracy. For this reason he was pessimistic about Hungary's future in the interwar years.

Jászi believed what was needed was a party of reform which, in the interest of peace and intra-national reconciliation, would unite all in its ranks. Cooperation among nationalities would facilitate economics and social progress. A Danubian Federation would be able to offer this.

When discussing the development of nation-states and nationalities, one of his beliefs was the evolution of larger and larger states over time. For this reason the idea of Danubian Federation seemed to be a natural progression. He wrote, "Any one of the nations in the Danube and Balkan regions is too small to have an entirely independent economic and political life and the daily struggles and rivalries among them make them all easy victims of foreign imperialistic schemes... the only road to self-determination, national independence, and economic prosperity lies in the direction of a free trade Danubian Confederation."³

Jászi did not believe that a territorial solution was the best because it would dissolve the economic unity of this region. He believed that the Carpathian Basin should indeed comprise one unit. By disbanding this unit commerce would be hindered as would the free flow of traffic and ideas. This would in turn make political and economic progress more difficult. He, also, believed that the rivalries among succession states would make them easy targets for becoming vassals of foreign aggressors.

Jászi ascertained that a political unit such as a confederation would solve the economic problem and the nationality issues and therefore eliminate the

danger zone. He constantly stressed that the Danubian Region constituted a "danger zone" in Europe. The peace settlements, he argued, failed to solve effectively and permanently the problems of this area. Though the area had been de-feudalized and the local peasantry had been allowed to enter the mainstream of political life, the peace settlements had disrupted the region's economic unity, embittered race relations and created new and strong irredentas.

Jászi believed that in spite of Hungary's small size, the Hungarian question is intimately connected with the general condition of the neighboring states. Therefore, Hungary must discontinue her recent state of despair and dreams of revenge in order to work for serious reconstruction and establishment of an equilibrium in the Danubian countries.

Jászi then went on to describe his theory of the "danger zone" which according to him was made up of the Dual Monarchy, the Balkan States, and the Russian empire which were all, in his opinion, unfinished units. Therefore, they presented a danger zone because the role of national consciousness was usurped by armies and dynasties. The national language and class were created to the detriment of the subject races. This, in turn, produced strong irredentas and the Slovaks, Rumanians, and Yugoslavs of Hungary met in secret organizations with their kindred nationalities both within and without the Monarchy. Unfortunately, Jászi states that all such efforts were futile against the wall of Hungarian feudal privilege.⁴

He also discusses the breakdown of economic units which were linked together by ties of cultural intercourse and free trade that are now broken to pieces. He believes that the military and customs barriers that were set up could only be detrimental because they divide rather than unite. He makes an analogy between these units and living organisms. These artificial changes stopped the natural blood flow according to him and, therefore, produced a falling off in production and the result were famine and misery.

This is all linked in his mind with the peace treaties which Jászi called short sighted and unjust in many respects. He believed that the treaties inflicted unnecessary hardship and humiliation upon the losers. This in turn helped to stir up national and racial hatred to levels way beyond the prewar ones and he thought that the new irredentas building up were much more dangerous than the old ones.

This all led him back to his original thesis which was the establishment of a democratic federation to solve these problems by having all national groups live in harmony. He states, "the only possible cure for Europe's ills is a democratic confederation of democratic peoples - this would lead to a peaceful and rational cooperation between countries for the common good of all. The fundamentals of this system are to be found in two basic units: free trade

between all the parties to the confederation and a system of honest national and cultural autonomy for all national minorities living within the boundaries of the confederation.”⁵

Jászi went on to say that the territories of the Danube and the Balkans are linked together by powerful economic, geographical, and cultural ties. Therefore, peaceful cooperation seemed like the best solution for future happiness. Jászi, like Kossuth before him, thought that any one of the nations in this region was too small to live entirely independent economic and political lives and the struggles among them would make them easy targets for foreign imperialistic schemes. In this case he was quite prophetic as this would indeed become a growing reality when the nations of Eastern Europe fell under the shadow of first the Third Reich and later the Soviet Union.

Hungary, Jászi felt, had turned the wrong way. He spoke bitterly against the conservative regime of Horthy while at the same time being enthusiastic about the newly established democracy in Czechoslovakia. Hungary he said needed to be 1) defeudalized 2) demilitarized 3) introduced to democracy and 4) obtain a program of agrarian reform. Also he stressed the necessity of good relations with one's neighbors.

In *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Hungary* Jászi wrote, “that only through a thorough-going democratization of Hungary and loyal and intimate relations between this democratized Hungary and the new states could such an atmosphere be created in central Europe as can cure the greatest evils of the present situation and clear the way for a democratic confederation of all small nations which are not tormented by the dogma of national sovereignty.”⁶

In the meantime, Jászi continued to be a member of Oberlin College's faculty and published his best-known English language book in 1929, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*. Early in 1935, Jászi visited Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. It became evident to him that the new states were plagued by the same problems as the old Habsburg Monarchy. This only helped to reinforce Jászi's conviction that the only possible solution to the region's problems was a federal structure which combined cultural and administrative autonomy.

Although every economic rapprochement and extension of free trade would have resulted naturally in a better division of labor and consequently in a more natural exchange of products, the mere application of such a proposal would not solve the immediate problems of these countries according to Jászi. He states that only a general European Customs union could dispose of the surplus of the agrarian states.

Only a regenerated agriculture could bring about a higher standard of living of the population. This would be a necessary step for the union of the

Danubian countries in the form of a confederation. Jászi was being more realistic and critical in the mid-1930s than he had been in the immediate post-World War I era. He saw that certain economic steps need to be taken before political aspirations could be attained. He went on to say that only a prosperous and cultured peasantry could break down agricultural and industrial monopolies which were closing down the door to Danubian cooperation. This regeneration of agriculture that should lead to a political cooperation which be the main task of the Danubian countries.

The economic and political expropriation of the former ruling classes in Czechoslovakia, Rumania, and Yugoslavia creates an unbridgeable gap between past and present. The tension was further aggravated by the competition between middle classes of the ruling nations, and those of the national minorities. This was only partly due to distrust between the various races; it was caused to a large extent by the general economic crisis. The disastrous effects of economic nationalism and the continuously growing war budget made the future outlook of the middle class practically desperate.

He went on to discuss each of the succession states and why the Treaty of Trianon was cruel and unjust.⁷ He stated that it naturally has led to discontent among the various nations and could be alleviated only if they would joined together in a confederation where they would be working for the common good rather than against each other. The economic crisis of the Danubian states was just too great to be left alone.

Jászi divides the Danubian states into two categories – those that were agricultural (Rumania, Hungary, Yugoslavia) and those that were industrial (Austria, Czechoslovakia). The first three suffered overpopulation which led to an immediate agricultural crisis. A backward agriculture meant a backward consumption of industrial commodities. The general poverty of the countries prevented this from changing and, hence, the never-changing spiral further into poverty. Austria, on the other hand, had a highly developed industry. However, it lost its markets in the aftermath of dismemberment and had to contend with competition from the artificially fostered industries of the neighboring states. Even Czechoslovakia, whom Jászi calls “the rich heiress of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy”⁸ because she inherited the most productive agricultural territories and industrial resources, also, was living under increasingly adverse economic conditions because of taxation and increased military expenditures.

Jászi, also, noted problems with infrastructure such as the deterioration of the possibilities for cheap transportation. This occurred because the new governments often changed the routes of transportation. For example, main lines were converted into secondary ones and *vice versa*. Also, the states in

their intensified rivalries introduced competitive traffic systems and measures which impeded movement between states. Therefore, the unity of the Carpathian basin was lost and the succession states suffered because they refused to cooperate in any coalition that resembled their Habsburg past. Jászi saw this as foolhardy and contrary to progress.

In the beginning of World War II, Jászi again pushed forward the idea of a Danubian confederation. He talked about a Czech friend of peasant origin who expressed the hope that the liberated peasants of the danger zone would create democratic federations among themselves; Danubian, Balkan, and Baltic federations would put an end to the prevailing system. He concluded by saying, "Such democratic federations would mean the isolation of the great capitalistic states which without vassals and exploited colonies could not uphold their traditional diplomatic rivalries and militaristic intrigues."⁹

The problem, according to Jászi, was that the leading statesmen of the victorious Entente had not had conception of the fundamental nature of the problem. Their only concern was how to keep humiliated Germany subservient. Therefore, the liberation of the various nationality groups was carried out on the basis of power politics establishing artificial frontiers, new strategic lines, new dominant and subjected national groups as chattel and pawns in the imperialistic game. Instead of furthering the beginnings of a new democratic life, the conservative statesmen of Europe supported the former oligarchies.¹⁰

However, a democratic federal structure could provide the necessary stability. The prerequisite of such a plan would be a genuine Bill of Rights, complete national autonomy for all the minority groups inside the various states, the final elimination of the feudal estates and the creation of a progressive and cooperative peasantry which alone could eliminate the problem of overpopulation and slow starvation. Again as in the 1930s, Jászi emphasizes building things up upon the peasantry. His maxim being that a prosperous, contented peasantry lays a foundation for a country with similar characteristics.

As time progressed, Jászi became more strident in his opinions. He states that the only solution to put an end to Danubian anarchy is the establishment of a confederation. It is necessary as a bulwark against new imperialistic aggressions. However, he believes that a Danubian federation under the protection and leadership of a democratic world union would not solve the problem of a permanent peace. "The burning problem of the Danube and the Balkans cannot be solved without the cooperation of an enlightened and friendly Germany."¹¹

Jászi encouraged the creation of a Danubian and Balkan federation (possibly two separate federations) under the leadership of the federal union of the victorious powers which could carry out with unhesitating energy the

process of political democratization, the expropriation of feudal classes, and the creation of a modern cooperative peasant economy. Again he reiterated the importance of a stable and prosperous peasantry.

He also advocated the breakup of the existing countries into smaller units like Slovakia and Croatia. This is especially relevant in our day since these groups are advocating their freedom and discussing the dissolution of a centralized federal structure in favor of a looser confederation. In a way, Jászi was quite prophetic because he offered a solution before the problem even occurred.

In 1945 the nations of Eastern Europe embarked on a policy of expelling undesirable minorities from their territories. The policy was pursued even by Czechoslovakia – a state which Jászi had admired in the interwar period. These events deeply affected Jászi and he condemned them. To him these policies destroyed the spirit of cooperation which would have been absolutely essential for a federal reorganization of the region. He concluded that the expulsion of Hungarians from Slovakia and the Germans from everywhere, destroyed hopes for a Danubian and Balkan Confederation.

In the post World War II era he attained a better opinion of his co-nationals and describes them as a sober, hard-working, extremely intelligent ethnic group. He stated that it was their situation that impeded them. He went on to say that the Hungarian people at their first fully free elections proved that their natural intelligence and sense of decency showed them the correct political path. He saw no reason if political freedom lasted for them to behave differently from their counterparts.

Jászi continued to speak out against injustices against minorities and condemned the expulsion of 420,000 Germans from Hungary in 1945.¹² In the spring of 1945 Jászi urged the Danubian countries to get rid of certain nationalistic and class prejudices and work in the interests of solidarity. A system of local federations needed to be developed, he said, as a part of a larger European Union. In effect, he was predicting the events of 1992. His ideal aim was the federal organization of the whole Danube–Vistula region consisting of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Bulgaria. It would include a territory of about 540,000 square miles with more than 100 million inhabitants.¹³

In reintroducing his idea of “Eastern Switzerland”, Jászi stated that human nature is essentially the same everywhere and an economically reconstructed and federated Central-Eastern Europe would lead inevitably to the solution of the nationality problem.

Notes

1. Oscar Jaszi, "Dismembered Hungary and Peace in Central Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, December 1923, p. 273.
2. Oscar Jaszi, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Hungary*, Howard Fertig, New York, 1969, (1st edition, P.S. King and Son, 1924), p. x.
3. Oscar Jaszi, "Dismembered Hungary and Peace in Central Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, December 1923, p. 281.
4. Oscar Jaszi, "Dismembered Hungary and Peace in Central Europe," p. 272.
5. Oscar Jaszi, "Dismembered Hungary and Peace in Central Europe," pp. 280-281.
6. Oscar Jaszi, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Hungary*, p. xi.
7. Oscar Jaszi, "Neglected Aspects of the Danubian Drama," *Slavonic Review*, July 1935, p. 65.
8. Oscar Jaszi, "The Economic Nationalism of the Danubian States," p. 109.
9. Oscar Jaszi, "The Future of Danubia," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, July 1941, p. 128.
10. Oscar Jaszi, "The Future of Danubia," p. 129.
11. *Ibid*, p. 142.
12. Oscar Jaszi, "Choices in Hungary," p. 463.
13. Oscar Jaszi, "Central Europe and Russia," p. 3.

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4. Jaszi, Oscar, "The Economic Crisis in the Danubian States." *Social Research*, Vol. 2, 1935.
5. Jaszi, Oscar, "The Future of Danubia." *Journal of Central European Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 2, July 1941.
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8. Jaszi, Oscar, *Der Zusammenbruch des Dualismus und die Zukunft der Donaustaaten*. Wien: Manzschke Verlags- und Universität-Buchhandlung, 1918.